

Tough Choice for the U.S.: Baltic States or Gorbachev

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Jan. 12 — The drive for independence in Lithuania and the other Baltic states has presented the United States with a diplomatic quandary, Administration officials said today.

The officials said they were torn between the long-stated American posture favoring self-determination for the Baltic republics and a more recent but fervent desire to see Mikhail S. Gorbachev remain in power as the Soviet President and not be undermined by domestic upheavals.

Although officials will not say so publicly, the Administration hopes that Mr. Gorbachev can work out an accommodation, even if it means something short of independence, because President Bush has staked so much on developing a relationship with the Soviet leader.

As a result, the United States finds itself in the strange and ambivalent position of pondering whether it can help avoid the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Mr. Gorbachev, who is on a three-day visit to Lithuania in an effort to cool passions for independence, has framed the issue in stark terms. He told

from holding formal meetings with officials of those republics. In addition, the United States provides diplomatic recognition to independent legations from the three republics. They have largely symbolic value; the head of the Lithuanian legation has not been in the United States for the last few weeks.

'A Great Dilemma'

Senator Claiborne Pell, a Rhode Island Democrat and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, began his public career as desk officer for the Baltic countries in the State Department. He said today that what is happening there "is a great dilemma" for Washington policy makers.

He said he had "the greatest sympathy for the desire of the Baltic peoples to manage their own affairs." But he added that he hoped it could be brought about "without force or bloodshed and without threatening the constructive leadership of Mr. Gorbachev."

John D. Steinbruner, the director of foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based public policy research center, said the importance to Washington of Mr. Gorbachev's remaining in power far outweighs any aspect of independence for the Baltic states.

"The basic thrusts of Gorbachev's policies are very constructive, and it's important for us to set a climate for them to succeed," he said. Mr. Gorbachev's continued presence, he said, is crucial to negotiating a new world security order.

The American position in favor of self-determination for the Baltic republics may have been acceptable when the breakup of the Soviet Union seemed only a remote possibility, "when it didn't have any practical impact," he said. It served to satisfy exile groups, he said.

"But now our position has to be truly national and not that of interest groups," he said. "It's not our business the Lithuanians and the Soviets deal with their problems."

'No Mechanism' for Involvement

Mr. Steinbruner said that in any event, it is difficult for the United States to have any effect on the situation. "We really have no mechanism for becoming directly involved," he said.

Some American officials said they believe that Mr. Gorbachev's ominous statements on how his future depended on events in the Baltic were overstated and that he may be slowly preparing the way for some form of independence. His words are the first round in a public negotiation, according to this view. One official said there was considerable debate in the Administration as to how far he can go and how much political damage he will sustain in the process.

"So far, Gorbachev has been able to stay well ahead of the changes," the official said.

Representatives of Baltic-American groups said they remained suspicious that the Bush Administration cares less about freedom in the Baltic states than in Eastern Europe.

"It's pretty clear they don't to be seen as encouraging the process," Victor A. Nakas, manager of the Washington Office of the Lithuanian Information Center, said of the Administration's current approach to the independence movement in the Baltics.

A long-held policy is at odds with support for the Soviet leader.

crowds in Vilnius, the republic's capital, that if they continued to press for complete independence from Moscow his future would be in doubt. "My personal fate is linked to this choice," he said.

As the Administration considers what course to set, officials said there was considerable debate about how threatened Mr. Gorbachev is by the independence movements in the Baltics. There is even less certainty as to what the United States could do to influence the situation.

State Department officials repeated their long-held position that the Soviet annexation of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia in 1940 was illegal. A department spokesman, Richard A. Boucher, said today that the United States supported "peaceful movement toward self-determination." Although that could mean independence, State Department officials were careful to avoid saying so, seeming to mute that position.

American diplomats are forbidden

Poles Protest Price Increases

WARSAW, Jan. 12 (AP) — A group of young anti-Government protesters broke a window of the National Assembly today and set a fire at Communist Party headquarters to protest recent price increases. Calling themselves the Intercity Anarchists, the group of about 200 marched to the National Assembly, where the Senate was in session. They shouted: "We have had enough of price rises!" and "Soups for Kuron!" a reference to Labor Minister Jacek Kuron, who has established soup kitchens for the poor.